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Follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women: review of mainstreaming in the organizations of the United Nations system

Follow-up to and implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action

Report of the Secretary-General

Addendum

III. Reports prepared in accordance with specific mandates

Situation of Palestinian women and assistance provided by organizations of the United Nations system**

1. The present report on the situation of Palestinian women and assistance provided by organizations of the United Nations system, as requested by the Economic and Social Council in resolution 1997/16, is based on information and data collected by United Nations bodies monitoring the situation in the occupied territories, such as the Special Committee to Investigate Israeli Practices Affecting the Human Rights of the Palestinian People and Other Arabs of the Occupied Territories, and by the Special Rapporteur of the Commission on Human Rights on Palestinian territories occupied since 1967. Information on assistance to Palestinian women was requested from the United Nations system and replies from 12 entities have been included in this report.

I. Situation of Palestinian women

2. The situation of Palestinian women living in the Palestinian self-rule areas and in the occupied territories has not improved, according to the information provided. Daily life in the self-rule areas continued to be affected by the imposition of security-related measures by the Israeli authorities, which had a detrimental impact on the economic and social situation. As in the past, Palestinian women are experiencing the gender-specific impact of these measures, which is reinforced by existing inequalities in society between women and men.

3. In his report to the Commission on Human Rights, Mr. Hannu Halinen (Finland), the Special Rapporteur on Palestinian territories occupied since 1967, noted that the issue of settlements, including the confiscation of Palestinian land, was emerging as the greatest preoccupation of the inhabitants of the occupied territories, especially in the West Bank. Settler violence and closures imposed by the Israeli

* E/CN.6/1998/1.

** See also E/CN.6/1998/2, chap. III, sect. A.

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authorities on the occupied territories in the wake of security incidents were further issues of concern. The closures had a devastating impact on the fragile Palestinian economy and contributed to maintaining unemployment at an estimated 40 per cent in the Gaza Strip and 30 per cent in the West Bank (E/CN.4/1997/16). Palestinian incomes have dropped sharply since the Oslo Agreement in 1993, from $1,800 to $950 a year in the West Bank, and from $1,200 to $600 a year in the Gaza Strip.[1] With the established threshold for poverty at $998.50 a year, the poverty rate is estimated to be 20 per cent in the West Bank and 40 per cent in the Gaza Strip. As a result of the closure of the occupied Palestinian territories, much of the $1 billion assistance received since 1993 had to be spent on short-term job creation programmes and income support rather than the envisaged longer term investment in infrastructure and institution-building (see A/52/179-E/1997/76, annex).

4. The Special Committee reported that the deterioration of the economic situation has a negative impact on women, especially those who head households. Economic pressure is also contributing to the erosion of the social fabric, resulting in delayed marriage and the increase in the rate of divorce (see A/52/131/Add.2). The Special Rapporteur noted the deterioration of the situation of women in the occupied territories, which had been reported as one of the hidden effects of the closure (see E/CN.4/1997/16).

5. The closure affected the health conditions of the population in the occupied territories, especially in Gaza. Patients needing specialized treatment available only in Israeli hospitals frequently did not receive entry permits. According to figures collected, one third of the Palestinians referred by Palestinian health committees could not obtain permits to enter Israel (see A/52/131/Add.2). Women's reproductive health is of particular concern. The Special Rapporteur noted that at least 10 persons, including at least seven pregnant women, are believed to have died for want of ready access to better equipped medical facilities. The Palestinian Authority Ministry of Health issued a statement in Gaza claiming that 26 babies had been stillborn because of delays at security checkpoints during the lengthy closure imposed after the suicide bombings in 1996 (see A/51/131/Add.2). One woman had to give birth at a road block, having been prevented from travelling to a hospital (see A/52/131).

6. The closures had a negative impact on education, in particular for students from Gaza who could not attend their educational institutions in the West Bank. As the educational sector is already affected by overcrowding due to the population increase and deteriorating premises, any additional obstacle further jeopardizes the scholastic achievements of students and has a specific gender impact. Limited resources to fund the employment of teachers and the construction of new schools and classrooms have curtailed the educational activities carried out by the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) for the refugee population. In the report of the Secretary-General on assistance to the Palestinian people, (A/52/159-E/1997/69), it was noted that improvements in the educational sector and capacity development in the classroom were a high priority for the Palestinian Authority.

7. The Special Committee to Investigate Israeli Practices Affecting the Human Rights of the Palestinian People and other Arabs of the Occupied Territories reported several incidents of harassment and physical ill-treatment of civilians. The information provided indicates that women and girls were victims of violence and sexual harassment when their family homes were searched for weapons by the Israeli police force. They were subject to full strip searches, sometimes in front of their children and male policemen (see A/52/131).

8. The Special Committee also reported that family reunion was hampered. Palestinian women married to Jordanian citizens were refused renewal of their residence permits and the visas of their husbands were invalidated.

9. Progress has been achieved regarding Palestinian women prisoners in Israeli prisons who had not been released as previously agreed. The remaining women prisoners were released by the Israeli authorities on 11 February 1997 in accordance with the 1995 Interim Agreement between Israel and the Palestinian Authority (see A/52/131/Add.1).

10. The quality of services of UNRWA, the main provider of support for Palestinian refugees, has been eroding due to the steady increase in the refugee population and inflation on one side, and austerity measures and budgetary reduction that led to the reduction of a number of its programmes on the other side. The average expenditure per refugee has dropped by 29 per cent since 1992. Since Palestinian refugee women are direct beneficiaries of UNRWA programmes, they have been hit by the cut in services.[2]

2. Follow-up activities to the Fourth World Conference on Women

11. In the Palestinian self-rule areas and occupied territories, progress has been reported with regard to the elimination of some discriminatory laws and practices. The draft Palestinian constitution emphasizes the principle of equality between men and women. Palestinian women can

now obtain a passport without written consent of so-called guardians, widows can obtain passports for their children without the permission of a brother or father. Women can take driving lessons without a male chaperone and married students are no longer dismissed from school (see A/52/179).

12. The action plan to implement the Beijing Platform for Action, entitled "Strategies for a Post Beijing Palestinian Governmental Plan of Action Through the Year 2000", was prepared under the leadership of an Intergovernmental Coordinating Committee, which included representatives of the various ministries, the Directorate for Women's Development and a committee of non-governmental organizations in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. The United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM), jointly with the European Union, launched a "Post-Beijing Follow-up Operation" in the occupied territories and Palestinian self-rule areas and four countries of the Western Asia region (Jordan, the Syrian Arab Republic, Lebanon and Yemen). The International Training Centre of the International Labour Organization (ILO) at Turin organized a seminar on the strengthening of the national machinery for members of the Intergovernmental Coordinating Committee in the follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women in June 1997.

13. The "Strategies for a Post Beijing Palestinian Governmental Plan of Action Through the Year 2000" refer to the 12 critical areas of concern established in the Platform for Action. Measures to achieve the goals under the critical area of concern "women and armed conflict", include mobilization of Arab and international women's organizations in order to release all detainees, especially women; and to further cooperate with Israeli women to establish a peace culture.

3. United Nations assistance to Palestinian women

14. Information provided by the United Nations system shows that an increasing number of programmes and agencies of the United Nations system paid attention to gender aspects in development and continue to provide support to Palestinian women, in particular in the field of conference follow-up, income generation, health, education and training.

15. UNIFEM is supporting the effective implementation of the Palestinian action plan, its translation into national projects, and the establishment of institutional and human capacities within women's committees and non-governmental organizations at the national and regional levels, including the mainstreaming of a gender perspective into national development processes. Furthermore, UNIFEM launched a women in development facilitation initiative to better coordinate and exchange information on initiatives for women in development as carried out by donors, the Palestinian Authority and non-governmental organizations. It includes the establishment of a database of institutions and workshops on the use of the Internet. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) is providing support to established women's departments in the Ministries of Planning and International Cooperation, Youth and Sports, Social Affairs and Health, in order to enhance the capacity of the Palestinian Authority ministries to mainstream gender in development.

16. Many activities focus on women and the economy. ILO and its International Training Centre at Turin have implemented subprogrammes on the development of Palestinian women entrepreneurship and of Palestinian women's status. Four technical workshops have been organized in the Palestinian territories. The ILO programme of assistance places emphasis on income-generating opportunities for women. UNIFEM's Women's Economic Empowerment Programme in the Gaza Strip, undertaken jointly with the Ministry of Social Affairs, encourages enterprise development through the creation of entrepreneurial awareness, skills training and institutional capacity-building. Its goal is to decrease the burden of poverty and unemployment through a leadership and empowerment approach. The programme is carried out in close cooperation with the training department of UNRWA and the industrial development department of the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA).

17. The International Trade Centre (ITC) reported that it was implementing a mainstream project for the development and promotion of high-value floricultural products from the West Bank and Gaza Strip, in collaboration with the Palestinian Welfare Association. The project would create additional employment opportunities for Palestinian women in the export-oriented floricultural industry. ITC also prepared a project to provide trade development support to Palestinian women entrepreneurs, for which funding has not yet been secured.

18. The World Bank's activity in the West Bank and Gaza Strip evolved from a programme designed to respond to emergency reconstruction needs to one focusing on longer-term development initiatives, which consequently pays greater attention to gender issues. No specific programmes directed towards women have been designed, but gender issues are addressed in projects of a social development nature. A Palestinian NGO Project was launched, which grants US$ 14.5 million for finance service delivery and capacity-building activities to Palestinian non-governmental

organizations. The project is aimed at assisting poor and disadvantaged Palestinians and grants would be provided for projects focused on women in the field of health, income generation and agricultural extension.

19. UNRWA continued to assist disadvantaged refugees, particularly women, to raise their economic status through skills training, production units, group savings and credit provision. Women were particularly interested in utilizing group savings and loan schemes for home improvement and income generation. In the Gaza Strip, 66 per cent of 4,452 loans valued at US$ 5.4 million were awarded to women. A local investment journal noted that the Agency's credit activity had macroeconomic consequences and was beginning to influence Palestinian financial markets. UNRWA's plan to achieve managerial and financial sustainability for community centres progressed. As of June 1997, 52 of the 71 women's centres were managed by local committees.

20. The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations carried out a consultancy mission on gender policies/institutions to the Palestinian territories. It identified four strategies to narrow down the gender gap in agriculture. Programmes of the International Fund for Agricultural Development addressed the needs of small farmers and fishermen, women and landless people in the rural areas of Jericho and the Gaza Strip.

21. The World Food Programme is providing assistance to the Palestinian non-refugee population, in particular in the Gaza Strip. Its poverty-alleviation scheme has targeted approximately 50,000 needy persons registered as special hardship cases, of which over 65 per cent are female heads of household.

22. In the field of education and training, UNDP has been carrying out a project on gender-sensitive education, implemented by four non-governmental organizations, which includes workshops for teachers on gender issues in teaching, subject curricula, counselling and discipline issues, the development of a gender-sensitive resource manual and community awareness campaigns. A rural girls development centre will train young rural women in various skills, including women's health and rights, agriculture and the arts. The Education and Health Project of the World Bank impacts positively on girls and women and will rehabilitate existing and construct new girls schools in Gaza. UNRWA is offering vocational and technical training for both women and men and, in addition, special courses for women. Sixty-nine per cent of the participants in a training course for teachers were women.

23. The programmes supported by the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) promoted basic education and health, with a cross-sectoral strategy for the promotion of children's rights and the empowerment of women. The strategy focused on advocacy, capacity-building and community mobilization. Technical assistance was provided to support projects related to gender equality in education and women's health.

24. UNFPA reported the establishment of a women's centre for health care, social assistance, legal counselling and community education in the Gaza Strip. In cooperation with the World Health Organization, UNFPA is providing assistance to the Women's Health and Development Department of the Palestinian Authority Ministry of Health.

25. With regard to women's and children's human rights, UNICEF has promoted the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women within the national programme of action, in cooperation with the newly established Gender Planning and Development General Directorate and the Secretariat for Children at the Palestinian Ministry of Planning. The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights is providing assistance to non-governmental organizations in the area of law reform and women's rights.

26. Within the United Nations Secretariat, the Division for Palestinian Rights of the Department of Political Affairs organized a round table on promoting equality and the full participation of women in society as part of the United Nations Seminar on Assistance to the Palestinian People (Amman, 20-22 May 1997). ESCWA conducted a field survey on the role of women's non-governmental organizations in the economy, education and health and on prospects for networking.

27. The United Nations Statistics Division gave technical assistance to the population and housing census conducted by the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics in the Palestinian self-rule areas (December 1997). To improve the collection of timely and reliable statistics on gender issues, UNDP provided assistance to the Gender Statistics Unit in the Central Bureau of Statistics. UNFPA and the World Bank supported the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics in carrying out the census, which will provide reliable and up-to-date population and housing data necessary for development planning, including data disaggregated by sex.

4. Conclusions

28. Considerable efforts are being made by the Palestinian authorities and civil society to improve the economic and

social conditions of Palestinian women, including legislative revisions. The 1997 population and housing census mentioned in paragraph 27 above will provide detailed information and data on the status of Palestinian women and become an important tool for policy planning and development aid. There is, however, little gender-specific information and analysis on the situation of Palestinian women with regard to, for example, the economy, social and political life, human rights or violence.

29. In the follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women, the international community, including the United Nations system, has provided assistance at various levels to implement the recommendations contained in the Platform for Action, to prepare a Palestinian strategy of action, to collect data disaggregated by sex, and to establish women-specific projects, particularly in the field of income generation. Further efforts and assistance are needed to implement the policies, in line with Economic and Social Council agreed conclusions 1997/2 on mainstreaming a gender perspective into all policies and programmes in the United Nations system (see A/52/3, chap. IV, sect. A).

30. As reflected in previous reports, the status and living conditions of Palestinian women are closely linked with the progress of the peace process. The present report indicates that women in the occupied territories continue to be directly affected in injurious ways by security measures and the overall effects of occupation.

Notes

1 See "Promoting poverty eradication and sustainable development", paper presented at the United Nations Seminar on Assistance to the Palestinian People, Amman, 20-22 May 1997 (SAPP/97/6).

2 See *Official Records of the General Assembly, Fifty-second Session, Supplement No. 13* (A/52/13).